

Ornamentals To Brighten Garden Palette

ROBERT GRIESBACH (D1267-2)



Lil' Pumpkin ornamental pepper.

Two new pepper cultivars developed by ARS scientists promise to provide striking color contrasts in the summer and fall garden. Unique fruit shapes and orange fruit color provide compelling seasonal interest, especially for fall gardens during Halloween and Thanksgiving.

The pepper cultivars are trademarked Lil' Pumpkin™ and Pepper Jack™. ARS plant geneticists John Stommel and Robert Griesbach, both with the Henry A. Wallace Beltsville Agricultural Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland, bred the peppers. Stommel is with the Genetic Improvement of Fruits and Vegetables Laboratory. Griesbach was with the Floral and Nursery Plants Research Unit and is now the ARS technology transfer coordinator for the Beltsville area.

The patented Lil' Pumpkin plants produce unique black foliage and orange pumpkin-like fruit, and the patent-pending Pepper Jack bears greenish-black foliage and a mix of both orange and black, small, cone-shaped fruit, similar to the ever-popular Halloween treat, candy corn.

"These ornamental garden vegetables have been trialed extensively, and they perform well in diverse environments,"

says Stommel. "They are well suited for use as bedding and container plants."

The breeders developed Lil' Pumpkin and Pepper Jack with both ornamental and culinary markets in mind. The peppers' vibrant colors and unique shapes provide enticing ornamental interest, and their spicy flavor may be of culinary interest to hot-pepper lovers.

When introduced into Europe in the 15th century, some widely grown vegetable crops, such as peppers, were prized more for their ornamental value than as food sources, says Stommel. Decorative kitchen gardens, called "potagers," were an important element of elaborate European gardens like those found at Versailles during the 1600s.

With renewed interest in ornamental and vegetable gardening, using vegetables as a focal element in the garden has become popular again.

Lil' Pumpkin and Pepper Jack join a long list of popular ornamental vegetables that includes kales, lettuces, sweetpotatoes, and eggplants, as well as culinary counterparts such as multicolored swiss chard, orange watermelons, purple snap beans, and purple asparagus.

Greenhouse growers have added ornamental vegetables to their annual production cycle because they are easy to produce and are extremely profitable compared to their culinary counterparts. The new peppers will be marketed in pots as annuals. "Similar to culinary peppers, ornamental peppers perform best in high light and warm temperatures," says Stommel.

Lil' Pumpkin and Pepper Jack have been licensed for retail sale by McCorkle Nurseries, Inc., in Dearing, Georgia. The plants are scheduled to become available in various garden centers and retail stores nationwide in 2010.—By **Rosalie Marion Bliss, ARS.**

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Pepper Jack ornamental pepper.